

IN TWO PARTS: PART ONE

Westways

October 1968





Catalina's Pigeon Express

IN A SUMMER day in 1888, George Shatto and his sister, Mrs. E. J. Whitney, stood on the southeastern heights of Santa Catalina Island observing the little town being completed on the harbor below. It was the realization of a dream—his dream of a holiday paradise to which the affluent would be attracted. All it required was regular transportation to the mainland twenty-five miles away, a telegraph line to Los Angeles and a name. The latter, of course, was the easiest to achieve.

His sister dipped into romantic memories of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* with its legend of King Arthur's golden city. "Call it Avalon," she said.

The name fit. And it was all his—the town, the island (all 55,000 acres of it)—cliff-girt, mountain studded, idyllically beautiful. He owned it all—he and the bank.

A year later William Banning, who operated four coastal steamers, was persuaded to schedule one of them, the *Hermosa*, thrice weekly between Avalon and Los Angeles' port of San Pedro. It did help popularize the island, but not enough, nor in time, to avert financial disaster. Santa Catalina went into the hands of the receivers and from there into the possession of William Banning.

Banning eventually compounded his gamble by building Avalon's most imposing structure, a gingerbread mansion dubbed the Metropole Hotel. By 1894, it had become one of California's more fashionable resorts, an island mecca for the socially elite.

The holiday season that year opened in June with a tidal wave of well-heeled sportsmen and sun-seekers overflowing the Metropole into such smaller hostleries as the Island Villa and the Grand View. The schedule of the *Hermosa* was increased to two trips a day.

The long parade of rocking chairs on the porch of the Metropole was manned daily by elderly colonels reminiscing over Indian wars, dowagers clucking over grains of gossip, mothballed commodores prescribing gunboat medicine for the troubles in Cuba, while paunchy politicians and businessmen abetted each other in roasting President Cleveland, Vice-President Adlai Stevenson, low tariffs, devalued silver and the Democratic administration in general.

Since Western Union had not yet laid a cable to the island, and neither wireless nor telephone had been invented, many of its visitors experienced a sense of isolation as satisfying as if Santa Catalina were in the mid-Pacific. To an influential minority, however, lack of swift communication with their business and family interests on the mainland was a constant irritant.

In Los Angeles, fifty miles to the northeast, the chief of Western Union's

By Irvin Ashkenazy

southern California operations peered across his desk at the two young men seated opposite.

"Pigeons?" he repeated disbelievingly. "Did you say 'pigeons'?"

Otto Zahn nodded matter-of-factly. "Antwerp carriers. The finest in California." He was a slender young man whose neatly manicured beard and moustache strove manfully to add to his twenty-four years.

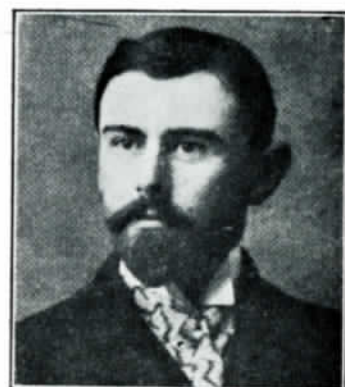
His brother, Oswald, twenty, beardless, with more enthusiasm than dignity, broke in eagerly, "Seventy-five of them and more hatching! All of 'em bred from Theodore Green's champion Royal Blue Line in Woodbury, New Jersey! . . . Mr. Green, he's the cousin of Colonel G. G. Green of Pasadena . . . the hotel man. . . ."

The man behind the desk blinked, his amusement beginning to wear thin.

Otto stepped into the breach quickly. "We've trained them to fly from Avalon back to their home loft at our house on Bunker Hill."

WEST 1424

HOME 21151



OTTO JOHANN ZAHN

CANDIDATE FOR
CITY COUNCIL
WITHDRAWN IN FAVOR OF
HAINES W. REED

In July, 1894, Otto J. and Oswald F. Zahn brought carrier pigeons to Catalina Island and launched a unique "airmail" service between Avalon and Los Angeles. Otto was later to become active in politics.